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AN ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

JEFFERSON SOCIETY

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA,

On the 13th. of April 1843,

BY J. C. RUTHERFOORD,
of Richmond.

Published by order of the Jefferson Society.

CHARLOTTESVILLE:
JAMES ALEXANDER—PRINTER.
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UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, APRIL 17, 1843.

SIR,

The Jefferson Society have appointed us a committee to request for publication a copy of your able and eloquent address. In the discharge of our duty it gives us pleasure, as representatives of the Society, to announce to you their high appreciation of the excellences and their cordial approbation of the sentiments contained in it; and, while we feel assured that the judgment of the public will corroborate the opinion of your fellow-members, we cannot too strongly request, in our individual capacity, a ready compliance with our desires.

Accept, dear sir, the thanks of the Society; to which permit us to add the very high regard of your

Friends and ob't. servants,

WM. M. COOKE,

WM. F. GORDON, JR.,

E. W. MASSENBURG,

To MR. J. C. RUTHERFOORD.

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, APRIL 20, 1843.

GENTLEMEN:

I have delayed to answer your note of the 17th. inst., doubtful what reply to give you. The address, which I delivered on the 13th. of this month, was, with no view to its publication, hastily prepared under the pressure of other duties which occupied nearly the whole of my time; and I much doubted the propriety of acceding to your polite request. But the desire of the Society, of which you so flatteringly assure me, and the solicitations of my too partial friends have induced me to disregard the dictates of my own judgment. I accordingly send you, herein, a copy of my speech, which I place at your disposal.

Let me assure you, gentlemen, of the high gratification I experience, from the approbation of those, for whom my esteem is so exalted.

With much respect, I am

Very truly, yours,

JOHN C. RUTHERFOORD.

To Messrs. WM. M. COOKE, WM. F. GORDON JR, E. W. MASSENBURG.

ORATION.

This day, one century since, Jefferson was born. The people of these States, should abandon, for a time, the bitter conflicts of party, and as one grateful nation, unite to honor the memory of a patriot. It peculiarly becomes us, here, reaping the fruits of his patriotism, here, on the soil of his nativity, and close by the sacred spot where his remains repose, to commemorate such an occasion.

Bright was the destiny of Jefferson! From first to last, his country was the idol of his soul; her glory, the goal of his ambition. In youth, he toiled for her freedom; in the evening of his days, he ceased not to labor for her prosperity. Exalted the meed of his career, and commensurate the honors which the world has awarded him. Esteemed abroad, among the first of our sages; in the land of his birth, his writings are the political Bible whence differing parties would derive their creeds. With the glory of his beloved country, his is interwoven; and the monuments, which are her proudest boast, proclaim his eulogy. Peace and happiness be to his spirit.

He needs no praises here. They have been breathed in the language of a Webster; and historians and biographers have recorded his deeds. To this audience, I will not dwell upon the well known incidents of his life. Let us rather turn our thoughts to those great principles, which guided his course. With republican principles, his name is indissolubly connected; and his fame is due to the efforts, which he made in their behalf. Their true bearing, we can study from the vantage ground of the nineteenth century. In his day, they were new and untried. Now, the lapse of years has more distinctly marked their character. Here, their trial has been fair, their success complete, and in other lands, they have extended their influence. Let us view their progress.

Four score years ago, France groaned under the weight of an unlimited monarchy. Her people, enveloped in ignorance, and inured to servitude, dared not to question the most oppressive decrees of their rulers. How stupendous the convulsions, which, since then, have rent her asunder! We have seen the French, from an humble submission to constituted authorities, and a holy veneration for time-honored

usages, pass at once to the opposite extreme : and rejecting all restraint, rush madly on in the paths of revolution, uprooting the established usages of their land, and aiming to remodel the whole fabric of society. Various the fluctuations of that grand revolution. Yet, amid all its inconsistencies, its changing dynasties, its bloody wars, and terrific massacres, freedom progressed. At the close of their memorable struggle, the combined powers of Europe could not subject the French people to their old constitution : nor does the human mind stand still, when the gleamings of truth have once struck brightly on its vision. Let the late astounding revolution of 1830 testify the progress of free principles in France. The consummate sagacity of Louis Phillippe can now scarce hold together the elements of monarchy ; and the arm of many an assassin has been raised against his life.

Our own, has been pronounced the true parent of the French revolution. If so, it may well be said that our glorious struggle (to the success of which, the active intellect, the indomitable zeal, and ready pen of Jefferson so much contributed) dates a new era in the history of man.

France was but the centre of an earthquake, which embraced all Europe in its heavings, and convulsed the world. The flame of liberty is not confined to France, during her revolution. It spreads in all directions, and “ its sparks are struck from the collision of hostile armies and opposing interests.” Close at hand, the Spaniards and the Portuguese rise against oppression. In Italy, the same spirit springs forth : and Greece, arousing from the sleep of centuries, bursts asunder the fetters of the barbarian. The sternest despots retreat before the advancing tide of opinion. No jarring commotions have disturbed the tranquillity of Germany. Favored land ! Her learned men have stood forth the saviours of their country. They have restrained the too hasty vehemence of the popular sentiment and induced the timely concessions of princes. Yet not the less complete, her bloodless revolution.

To whatever people of Europe we look, we find that free principles have gained ground since our revolution, and still grow in favor with the multitude.

And how is it with the isle of Albion ? Can it be that Britain, after so long and exhausting a crusade against freedom in other climes, is herself pervaded with the spirit she has warred against ? It is even so. Numerous, the symptoms. You see not now the fervent loyalty, which, at the commencement of this century, characterized the English people. But mark in its place, the general excitement, the deep-seated discontent, which is rife through the land. Witness the frequent risings of the laborers. Behold the rapid growth of

the radical party. Above all, reflect on the progress of chartism. Force cannot crush a body of men, whose petitions are signed by millions. The chartists demand radical reforms ; and they must be satisfied, or a crisis is at hand. The rulers of England are encompassed with difficulties. A suffering and exasperated people cry to them for relief. The necessity is urgent. Yet they cannot afford it. A debt of nine hundred millions, rests an incubus on the land, and still grows more bulky ; while its annual interest increases at a rate, soon to outbalance the whole revenue of that far stretching empire. The war against France aroused the first murmurs by its intolerable burdens ; and the contagion of her example first excited a spirit of reform. The reformers have now grown to millions. New views of government are prevalent ; and the descendants of an usurping bastard are no longer held divine. The strongest pillars of the British constitution are undermined and toppling ; and the whole edifice menaced with disruption.

Ireland, too, is eager for freedom. England's might has crushed her frequent uprisings. But the days of '98 are not forgotten. Sheridan, Curran and Grattan are green in the memories of their countrymen. They listen with delight to the bold declamation of O'Connell ; and await the opportunity to strike another blow for independence.

But it were indeed, no easy task, to follow the progress of free principles in Europe during the last fifty years. They have struggled against the combined resistance of mighty monarchs trembling for their sceptres. In whatever European clime the standard of freedom has been raised, Russia's " whiskered pandours and her fierce hussars " have rushed to uproot it. Austria and Prussia have ever lent their aid to the same vile purpose. And lamentable truth ! the rising flame of liberty has too frequently been smothered. By foreign force, a coward king was restored to rebellious Portugal ; a perfidious monster crowned in Spain ; and a hateful dynasty conferred on France. Thus Poland fell a sacrifice, and Kosciusko's efforts were in vain ; and thus Naples, Venice and Genoa succumbed to the holy alliance. Yet under all these discouraging circumstances, we can not doubt, that the principles for which Jefferson contended, have advanced in Europe with amazing rapidity.

In our western hemisphere, removed afar from " leagued oppression " by the wide waters of the Atlantic, the benign radiance of our light soon diffuses itself in the surrounding gloom, and

" Even the Spaniard's thirst of gold and war
Forgets Pizarro to shout Bolivar."

At the time of our revolution, the colonies of Spain were crushed to the earth by religious intolerance and political despotism ; and the existence of South America was not felt in the civilized world. Now, free and independent States rear their heads throughout the whole length and breadth of that vast and fertile clime ; and with the happy change, the land of Columbus has emerged from darkness. Upon our borders the republic of Texas has arisen ; and in all directions evidences of change strike upon our view.

We can not then be mistaken. { Since the day of Jefferson, free principles have advanced in Europe and America, and are still making their way with an accelerating speed. Great the influence which they have already exerted ; and greater the consequences which they are yet to produce.

There are those who deplore their progress. Many entertain a sacred reverence for the established customs and prevailing opinions of the "good olden times" of their forefathers. They regard with distrust all changes which clash with the prejudices of their education, and are startled by the boldness of those who would now abolish institutions which have withstood the ravages of twenty centuries. The same spirit has, in every age, cried out against reform and improvement. It persecuted the sturdy reformers of Europe, and our puritan forefathers with a blood-thirsty zeal ; it opposed, at first, the brilliant discoveries of Newton, and imprisoned Galileo for proclaiming the true theory of the solar system.

But no narrow prejudices were entertained by the expansive mind of Jefferson. It was not his wont, to condemn or to approve, either because of novelty or antiquity. Reason was his only guide, and it led him to advocate, with his whole heart and soul, the democratic principle. And surely, unbiased reason rebels against the divine right of kings ; it is shocked at the injustice of systems, which rear, in courtly effeminacy, an imbecile race, to rule the destinies of nations ; it recoils, in surveying the past history of man, to behold the lives and happiness of countless millions wantonly sacrificed, to gratify the private feuds and unhallowed passions of sensual and unfeeling Neros ; and it deplores the human intellect, so long beaten prostrate by iron-heeled oppression. In all ages, the nature of man, and the capabilities of his mind, have been the same. Yet for whole centuries, under despotic dynasties, the world has been enveloped in an unbroken darkness of intellect. The feeble cries of fettered reason have been stifled by the hand of triumphant tyranny ; and the atmosphere of slavery has extinguished the fires of genius, and disabled the expanding wings of thought and fancy. Under such blighting influences, how many noble spirits,

with energies to gain a deathless glory, have, in servile toils, unconscious of their faculties, fulfilled their destinies, and sunk into the grave, in life and death unheeded and unknown !

"How many a rustic Milton has past by,
Stifling the speechless longings of his heart,
In unremitting drudgery and care !"

* * * "How many a Newton, to whose passive ken
Those mighty spheres that gem infinity,
Were only specks of tinsel, fixed in heaven
'To light the midnights of his native town !"

It is, I know, a favorite theory with some, that monarchical governments are the most congenial to the development of mind. They point us to the numerous wits and scholars, who have flourished in the sun-shine of royal favor ; overlooking the fact, that the advantage of time is on the side of monarchy ; that the world has been for long ages ruled by kings, while republics have been few and short-lived. Yet we fear not to institute a comparison between the mighty efforts of mind which free institutions have never failed to develope, and the vaunted display of talent, which royal patronage has elicited. Let us compare the utter darkness of the long ages of royal dominion, which preceded the rise, and succeeded the fall of liberty in Greece, to the lustrous splendor which illumed the age of the Grecian republic. Let us compare the fawning sycophancy of the Augustan poets, to the bold spirit of the Grecian bards ; and the pithless translations and imitative strains of the Roman, to the daring originality of his Grecian master. Let us compare the light graces of Fenelon, Corneille, Racine and the school of authors, who flourished under the liberal encouragement of Louis XIV, to the deep philosophy, which the spirit of the French Revolution drew from Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. Let us compare, in all lands, the cringing parasites, who have upheld the divine right of kings, with those lofty souls, who have ever led the van of the opposition. The names of the former have sunk into merited oblivion, while on the other hand, it may truly be said, that all the great orators whom the world has produced,—Demosthenes and Cicero among the ancients,—Mirabeau, in France,—Chatham, Erskine and Canning, in England,—Sheridan, Curran and Grattan, in Ireland,—and in our country, Henry and Randolph have had the fires of their genius fanned by the breath of liberty, and earned their undying glory, in a manly contest against unjust exactions and tyrannical usurpations.

Viewed in its fairest aspect, the patronage of monarchs has been unstable and uncertain. An ill judged remark banished Racine from the court of Louis ; and a supple wit and

honied tongue have ever found more favor with the royal judge, than the unbending spirit of creative genius : while sublime philosophy and soul-stirring eloquence have always been exiled from the courts of princes. But how rarely has this patronage been displayed ? How few and sparsely scattered, in the long line of sovereigns, have been the fosterers of literary merit ? For every Augustus who has wisely swayed the sceptre, do I err in saying, that there have been hundreds of throned monsters, who have pandered their souls to lust and villainy ; and who, hating virtue, have outlawed all nobility of soul, and persecuted true merit with imprisonment and tortures ? The two mightiest names of antiquity, the rival orators of Greece and Rome, dared to raise their voices against usurping ambition ; and both were driven to an inglorious suicide by the relentless pursuit of the conquering despots. The wise and virtuous Seneca, victim to a tyrant's hatred, endured with philosophic firmness, the pangs of a cruel death ; and in the same dark era of proscription, the poet Lucan, (to use the nervous language of Tacitus) as his blood streamed, and his hands and feet grew cold, and life gradually departed from his extremities, yet with fervid soul, and intellect unclouded, recited forth the touching lines of his own poetry, until his last words were choked in death. It were indeed, melancholy to recount the long list of sages, who in ancient times have lived, under despotic rule, a life of suffering and persecution. Without tracing the picture in detail, and turning to more modern times, let the exile of Dante and Petrarch,—the unhappy distresses of the incarcerated Tasso,—the pinching poverty and cruel necessities of Ariosto, Goldsmith and Dryden,—the unmerited disgrace, and neglected old age of the illustrious Bacon,—the troubled life and obscure death of Milton,—the banishment of Locke,—the imprisonment of Galileo, Selden, Savage and Johnson, and the famished spirits of Cervantes, Spencer, Otway and Fielding sufficiently attest the blighting influence which, monarchical governments have exercised upon the human mind.

I will no longer dwell on this painful spectacle. In the place of kingly rule, Jefferson laboured to build up the sovereignty of the great people ; and as the principles, which he espoused, have extended, a true impetus has at last been given to the energies of man. The smiles of princes no longer constitute the whole object of ambition. The *people* have suddenly risen into respect ; and to advance their interests and gain their applause, philosophers, poets, historians, orators and statesmen now exert their powers. The mass of mankind are awakening from their long lethargy. With

eyes opened to juster views of their own prerogatives, the degraded feelings of slaves have left them, and they have learned to respect their dignity as *men*. Hitherto unfelt emotions and noble aspirations have fired their souls. And what has been the resulting consequence? An amazing development of thought, an unexampled extension of science and civilization. Arts, sciences and literature, religion, laws and government have changed their aspect. New sciences have sprung into being; old, have, by startling revelations been changed into new; and numberless useful inventions and happy discoveries have simultaneously burst forth, and, with a constellation's clustered splendour, thrown a diffuse light on every field of human enquiry.

All history shows, that freedom and knowledge are indissolubly connected and mutually dependant: twin sisters, linked by nature, they have advanced, hand in hand, during the last half century, and still move on together. Nor need we fear that the destroying hand of the ruthless barbarian can ever consign the world to a second period of darkness: flames cannot destroy, nor oceans engulph the power of the press; and a universal passion for the improvement of humanity, distinguishes the age from any which has preceded it. Man, after struggling, to and fro, amid various vicissitudes, in the dreary wilderness of ignorance and uncertainty, seems at last to have crossed the interminable wastes, so long barring his progress, and, as from Pisgah's height, beholds with joy a remote vista of the promised land. Nor is there danger that, bewildered again, he will blindly tread the mazes he has left. For now, the true rays of light beam upon his vision; the path is clear, and his march is onward. Great our delight to look forward with confidence to the steady advance of freedom and truth in all coming time! The stream of knowledge has at length surmounted the barriers, which have long checked its course, and broadens and deepens into a current of resistless force. Bright the prospects which glitter before our vision, as we gaze, with fancy's eye, upon its future progress, and, in the receding spaces of futurity, behold it moving ever with increasing flow, swelling into a noble river, with its leaping waves accompanied by freedom's genial breeze, and enriching the soil and multiplying the harvests of the human mind, as it rolls majestically onward to be merged in the ocean of time!

Gentlemen, we may not indulge any hope of the ultimate perfectibility of man. When we essay to comprehend nature in all its vastness, not only does our own boasted progress sink into insignificance; but we feel that the highest attainments, which man may ever reach would scarce suffice to

constitute a drop in the great, unfathomable sea of knowledge. Yet, should not this very fact brighten the tints with which we gild the horizon of the future? If all the advances which we have yet made, and all of which we can conceive, are as nothing to those which we *may* attain, how overwhelming to our little perceptions is the future which may be opening to man? Its dazzling reality, the most glowing pictures of the poet's fancy would fail to convey; and the golden dreams of the enthusiast would lose the semblance of visionary fantasies. If the barbarous Goth once roamed, in triumph, the unbroken mazes of a forest, where now, the lofty spires of European cities glitter in the sun beam; what forbids the hope that, as science and freedom continue to extend their sway, those unfortunate regions of the earth, which are still enveloped in darkness, will, in time, be also lighted by their rays? May we not hope that England's late war with China, unjust as it was, has at last opened the portals of Asia, and brought her hundreds of millions of citizens into communion with the rest of the world? While the opening of the Isthmus of Suez, contemplated by the Egyptian Pasha, promises to bring closer together, and connect into one, the two great continents of Europe and Asia. May we not hope that, as civilization spreads, and enlightened humanity sends abroad the missionaries of truth, the now unexplored regions of Africa will be peopled by mighty nations of freemen; and that, in time the banner of freedom and equality will be raised in every clime of the globe? And what, in fine, may we not expect, when universal freedom prevails? We, from the heights we have attained, look down with pity on the ignorance of ages which have past. But from how much loftier an elevation on the mount of knowledge, may future generations survey, with the same feelings, the comparative darkness of the age in which we live? As knowledge advances, we may well conclude that a time approaches, when civil, religious and political liberty shall every where prevail, and universal education remove the fetters of ignorance from the human intellect, and set its every spring into life and motion; when fierce dissensions and devastating wars shall cease, and the whole human family unite, in harmony and brotherly affection, to enlarge the boundaries of science, and increase the happiness of man; when the whole surface of the globe shall be beautified by the works of industry, its most barren tracks teem with fruits, under the skilful culture of educated farmers, and majestic cities rise in now deserted wilds; when countless high-ways shall traverse the land, flying æronauts, with the speed of light, cut through the azure clouds, and in every quarter, from pole to pole, and conti-

ment to continent, on land and sea, the sound of the bellowing steam be heard : while grand discoveries, now undreamed of, shall then burst on man's enquiring gaze, and effect still more splendid transformations in his destinies than the compass of the mariner, the types of the printer, or the agency of steam ; and new mechanical agencies, brought into play, shall (if not move the world, like the Archimedian lever,) suffice to mould all its elements at will, and levelling the barriers of Alpine mountains, and contracting the rolling waters of intervening oceans, bring the distant hemispheres more closely together, and unite in indissoluble bonds, all the inhabitants of earth.

Nor should these be esteemed Utopian visions. They seem to be the consequences, which must of necessity arise, as the domain of intelligence extends.

We, indeed, may expect in our lifetimes, to see astounding changes and brilliant developments. While those who now breathe in the eastern empires of the globe, may sink into the grave before the benign influences of civilization rescue their countries from ignorance and tyranny ; we have the happy fortune of living in a land, foremost pioneer of the age. In our favored clime, what changes too wonderful for a lifetime to effect ? Three score and ten years since, when a scanty population of two or three millions peopled the outskirts of our unbroken forests, and a few feeble and distinct colonies suffered under the oppression of a foreign yoke—who would not have been astounded, had the prospects hid beyond the veil of the future been disclosed to his view ? Who would have believed, had he then been told, that, in the space of one man's life, the two millions should swell into twenty, the little pennyless colonies vanquish the armies and navies of the greatest kingdom upon earth, and a mighty nation thence arise, feared and respected by all the powers of the world, with vessels traversing every sea, and a people free and happy under the fairest structure of representative government, ever reared by man. Yet these things have come to pass : and it may be our fortune to behold greater change than this. Even now in the vast West, populous cities arise, where savage beasts securely roamed, a half century ago ; already, canals and rail roads multiply, and schools and churches dot every portion of the land ; and already, is our short history decked by a long list of famous warriors and sages. But we are still in our infancy. The far-stretching valley of the Mississippi, whose fertile bosom might supply the world with sustenance, now sparsely inhabited, is yet to be thronged with millions of enlightened freemen ; the noble river is yet to whiten with the canvass

that wafts the increasing products of its own alluvial banks ; and its sites are yet to be adorned with the clustered dwellings and towering domes of congregated man. The hidden treasures of our mountain chains have yet to be explored. The Atlantic and Pacific have yet to be united : and from ocean to ocean, from the lakes of the North, to the gulf which bounds us on the South, there is no region which will not in time be densely peopled, no spot not destined to be the scene of some soul-stirring deed.

In a country, like this, possessed of exhaustless resources, distantly removed from the distracting broils of the eastern continent, its remotest sections pervaded by the healthful stimulus of a representative government, and a generous emulation springing up between its rival commonwealths, it is safe to anticipate, that the intellect of man will exhibit an unexampled activity, the native powers of the mind itself be expanded, and in future time, philosophers and poets, historians and orators appear, whose brilliant light shall eclipse the lustrous glories of the mighty dead. No fond partiality blinds us, methinks when we survey with pride the condition and prospects of our country. Sound reason justifies the conclusion, and impartial statesmen across the Atlantic avow the opinion, that, as our population increases, and our wise systems of education diffuse intelligence, a more brilliant destiny awaits us than a gracious Providence has hitherto vouchsafed to man.

But no farther will we pursue the beneficent results which must flow from the general diffusion of those principles which fired the soul of Jefferson. We have seen the rapid progress which they have made, and the momentous effects which they have already produced ; and have essayed to glance at some of the grander consequences which must attend their continued extension. His piercing eye, in the dark era of our colonial existence, clearly beheld, through overhanging clouds, the brilliant future of his country. He knew the nature of the germ which his labors contributed, to implant ; he divined the order of its growth, and what fruits to expect from its maturity. Hence, through life, one high ambition filled his soul. To advance freedom and knowledge, he toiled night and day. The last prayers, which he breathed to heaven, were for their still farther extension ; the last words, which quivered on his lips, were of joy at their progress ; and to crown the beautiful harmony of his career, on the memorable day, which gave immortality to him, and independence to his country, his exulting soul departed ; in the grand jubilee of liberty, his congenial spirit winged aloft its triumphal flight, amid the rejoicings of a free and happy nation.

None of us may expect to witness the second centennary of his birth. But it will not pass unnoticed. When it next recurs, some orator will here proclaim his praises to an auditory now unborn, when the grave holds our mouldering bones. We meet to mark the first coming of this day with a grateful tribute to the memory of Jefferson. But, though generation after generation pass away, though Egyptian pyramids fall and be forgotten, in the lapse of time, and far different scenes meet the eye, where now stand these walls; yet its successive returns, so long as freedom and virtue endure, will be hailed with distinguished honor, and commemorated with reverential gratitude.

He lived for all mankind. No spot may claim him as its own. Yet, gentlemen, we have reason to regard his memory with peculiar veneration. We stand amid the mountain scenery which first greeted his infant vision, and shed its ennobling influence on his character. Each morn, we see the sun ascend above that venerable mansion, where, exercising an unbounded hospitality, and fondly engaged in schemes of active benevolence, his old age reposed in the happy consciousness of a well spent life; while the last rays of the sinking orb linger and play, before our vision, around the summit of that lovely mount, which constitutes his tomb, grander and more enduring by far than stateliest mausoleums of human art. Here, where a boy, he traversed a forest-wild, his persevering labors have erected the classic walls of this University; and to him, we are indebted, for the inestimable advantages which, within our Southern borders, are afforded us by so comprehensive an institution. Surely then, surrounded by such memorials of the man, and owing him a great debt of gratitude, his bright example should impress itself with peculiar vividness upon our hearts. Let us imitate him in unceasing endeavors to advance freedom and knowledge among men. With an intelligent and virtuous people, no storm can shake our security. It should, then, be our effort to spread abroad the lights of truth, and to elevate the character of our countrymen. It was their disinterested zeal for the great mass of the people, which has given to Washington, Jefferson and Adams, the affectionate veneration of a grateful posterity. If ever their equals should arise, their glory will be due to a like pure ambition: and it is only by pursuing the same course, that we, gentlemen, may contribute our humble efforts to increase the happiness and exalt the dignity of man.

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